Alex Impey

Alex Impey: ***Orangutan***
Glasgow Sculpture Studios
17 November – 15 December

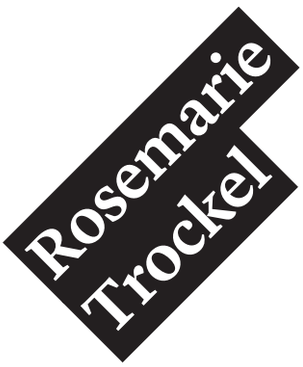
There's not much to look at in Alex Impey's installation. Of the two rooms, one is sparsely furnished with an equally spaced row of five thin vertical steel poles, pierced and laced with wire and fibre. Two small, framed graphite drawings on paper hang on the walls. Faint and indeterminate in their subject matter, they could have been ripped from a sketchbook. The second space contains only a set of rough, spindly timber shelves. A further, wall-mounted shelf just outside the gallery spaces holds a sheaf of A4 texts, which stand in for a press release or conventional interpretative gallery text.

The exhibition marks the culmination of Impey's yearlong Gordon Foundation Graduate Fellowship at Glasgow Sculpture Studios and continues a sculptural practice that encompasses words and writing as much as objectmaking. At times, Impey's writing has veered towards Concrete Poetry in terms of the artist's interest in wordplay and the visual form or physicality of the written word; at other times, a more diffuse sense of an interest in conceptual writing or postcriticism is at play. Presumably, then, the A4 handout is as much an artwork as the primary sculptures in the main spaces, though the relationship between the two practices is unclear, aside from the fact that both contain aspects of found or preexisting forms that have been reassembled or adapted by the artist.

Unlike the typical creative plagiarism or appropriative writing that is used in many 'parallel texts' or examples of writing-as-art, Impey's text is drawn from only one source (or at least, only one cited source): Paul A. Johnsgard's *The Avian Brood Parasites: Deception at the Nest* (1998). Beyond the discussion of visual mimicry and the idea of the parasite, there's not much to direct our reading of the sculptural works, or vice versa. The unintentional link, if there is one, is that both writing and objects are extremely dry and seem to sneer at their audience, assuming that most people won't get it. We are left to assume that this is another treatise on the aesthetics of boredom.

The artist's very self-conscious refusal to signify may pose a stimulating challenge to some. It may encourage a layered and sophisticated aesthetic response and a determination to engage with the work. But equally, the denial of any meaningful entry point threatens to leave others utterly indifferent, or unwilling to pursue any deeper understanding of the work. Perhaps this obscurantism and ambiguity mask a complex intellectual structure, but the objects don't operate effectively enough to demand a maximal response from this viewer. It's work that philosopher Richard Wollheim might have described as having a 'minimal art content'. Except it's not 1965 any more.

SUSANNAH THOMPSON



Rosemarie Trockel: ***A Cosmos***
New Museum, New York
24 October – 20 January

***A Cosmos* cements** Trockel's reputation as one of our generation's most provocative, and most postmodern, 'badasses'. The artist has been making work for more than 30 years, and her three-floor antiretrospective really is a fascinating, epic exhibition that flouts the very conventions of a survey, particularly in the show-stopping second floor, which operates as a kind of wildly erratic 'cabinet of curiosities'; Trockel includes not only her work but also the works of others, including those of bizarre, outlier artists like Günter Weseler – his disconcerting *Atemobjekt New Species U 90 /73 (Nr. 15, Nr. 16)* (1973), consisting of two breathing discs of synthetic fur – as well as numerous anthropological specimens, including *Lucky Devil* (2012), a giant crab sitting on a pile of fabric. In the process, the very ontology of art – what is high and low, insider and out – is at once questioned and affirmed.

The conceptual starting point for *A Cosmos* is a small, white-tiled room on the second floor, in which *Untitled* (2012), a large, fake palm tree suspended upside down, is juxtaposed with both a framed picture of a tarantula poised on a woman's vagina and the installation *As Far As Possible* (2012), a white steel cage containing a tableau of mechanical stuffed birds perched, nonplussed, on branches. Trockel's quizzical methodology spills into the next room in the form of cases containing a smattering of odd curios. In one, Morton Bartlett's tacky dancing ballerina figurine from 1959–60 – on loan, tellingly, from the Museum of Everything in London – is poised in front of its own photographic portrait, as well as Trockel's *Geruchsskulptur 2 [Scent Sculpture 2]* (2006), a combination leg and table made of ceramic and metal, upon which a tumbler is filled high with whiskey. In another case, a flock of paper birds sculpted by James Castle are surrounded by one of Trockel's small, white wool canvases and a blocky, white totemic figure she sculpted from metal, feathers and plaster. Precisely what sense is to be made of this gallery's disparate objects and images is left unclear, though clarity is beyond the point. Not unlike the system of taxonomy in the Chinese encyclopaedia that so fascinated Foucault, Trockel is putting forward an incongruous adjacency of things, from the cheap to the fine, that reflect our culture's conflicting value systems.

Elsewhere, the exhibition hews more closely to convention. The third floor is dominated by recent iterations of the artist's well-known knit and wool paintings, for which yarn is wrapped tightly around square and rectangular shapes to form striped and monochromatic geometric abstractions, a nod to Anni Albers vis-à-vis craft. In a rather contrived pairing, these woollen Modernisms are hung next to outsider artist Judith Scott's vaguely animalistic sculptures, which are suffocated in tightly wound knitting. Upstairs, Trockel's ceramic sculptures take on various organic and manmade shapes, such as coral and rock formations, chimney mantles and, with *Landscapian Shroud of My Mother* (2008), a strikingly architectural modernist platform. As elegant and wide-ranging in influence as these forms may be, they don't hold a candle to the *Wunderkammer* on the floor below, where Trockel radically pairs her own canon with the alternative canon of others.

DAVID EVERITT HOWE

Julie Blackmon: *Day Tripping*
Robert Mann Gallery, New York
1 November – 12 January

In the Internet age, there is something vaguely unsatisfying about a photography exhibition, even if the photographs are large-scale and painterly like those in Julie Blackmon's *Day Tripping*. For netizens used to clicking through images at a rapid clip, the pictures seem stagnant. Resting behind glass panes, they fail to stimulate. It takes a certain amount of self-control to slow down and really look at each composition, knowing that most likely you can find it later on your laptop via a Google search.

On the face of it, Blackmon's photographs deserve such consideration. Taken on elaborately staged sets in Springfield, Missouri, where the artist was born and raised, the 11 surreal landscapes, inhabited almost exclusively by Aryan-looking children, are rich with layered details. In *Picnic* (2012), a group of young kids roam, apparently unsupervised, in a lush meadow. In the foreground, an antique pram holds three wailing naked babies. In the background, slightly older children trample through the long grass, one of them raising a hunting rifle towards a black bird. Like *Fire* (2012), in which a young boy triumphantly holds a burning branch in front of a crowd of children, the scene has a distinctly *Lord of the Flies* feel. Juxtaposed with images such as *Sharpie* (2011), in which a tiny girl lies on her back, her golden hair arranged like a halo, her arms raised in a gesture of ecstasy brought on, presumably, by huffing the permanent marker flung near her left hand, it is easy to read a sinister Peter Pan-like narrative into the exhibition.

'Neverland' is disrupted by the presence of adults in works such as *Homegrown Food* (2012), which is inspired, according to the press release, by the French painter Balthus's *La Rue* (1933). In the original image, which scandalised audiences when it was first shown, characters walking down a bustling street are seemingly oblivious to a middle-aged man sexually assaulting a schoolgirl. In Blackmon's image, a man, dressed all in black – in jarring contrast to the wholesome suburban scenery around him – smokes a cigarette in a lot between two shops, while a young blonde girl plays tennis against the storefront just around the corner. Unlike Balthus, who once stated that any girl older than 13 is an 'old camel, past her prime', Blackmon, who is the first of nine children, and a mother to three, is likely not exploring lecherous urges in her work. Instead, the picture is about isolation. The man is cut off from the world of the child. In the space of the image, they'll never touch.

Ultimately, however, this photograph, and many others in the show, are only as engaging as a screenshot from SimCity. Lacking depth enough to make it worth the trip to see the works in person, the exhibition lingers because of a single image, that of the angelic child getting stoned.

BRIENNE WALSH

Fore
Studio Museum in Harlem, New York
11 November – 10 March

***Fore*, an exhibition** of 29 emerging artists of African descent living in the US, returns to issues first broached at the Studio Museum in a survey mounted in 2001. Called *Freestyle*, that show asked what it was to be black – or depending on where one sat in the audience, to be 'me', 'us' or 'them' – in contemporary America and how that experience of race informed the work of young artists of colour. In her catalogue essay, *Freestyle*'s curator, Thelma Golden, mooted the idea of 'post-black', suggesting that race as an absolute, with its activist overtones, no longer defined identity. Rather, the sense of self had become, as the show's title implied, improvisational and multivalent. Its affects were individual and coded, drawing from and contributing to, but not defining, the personal experience of race.

'So, what happens to black after post-black?' This is the critical question the three curators of *Fore*, Lauren Haynes, Naima J. Keith and Thomas J. Lax, set themselves. The homophonic title of their show (it is the fourth in a series of surveys) suggests that meaning (like identity before it) is mutable, multiple and interpretive.

The exhibition includes a high quotient of artists who play with language. Many of them work in multiple media: painting, sculpture and particularly performance, blurring the boundaries between them. Being 'post-medium', as Lax characterises the mix in his catalogue essay, seems to enact, in terms of artistic methods, the open-ended possibilities of being 'post-black'.

Much of *Fore* seems to follow directly from *Freestyle*. Brenna Youngblood's painterly canvases collaged with graphic elements scavenged in Los Angeles – French-fry boxes from fast-food joints that she cuts to spell out words like 'burger', for example – and references to high art and local communities strongly recall the way that Mark Bradford employed papers used in perming hair to construct gridded canvases embedded with personal markers of his sexual orientation, his work as a hairdresser and the community in South Central Los Angeles where he lived. Firelei Báez's paintings of voluptuous figures, lifted from YouTube videos of street fights and painted in floral patterns on the pages of books removed from university collections, seem of a piece with the international phone bills painted with women boxing by *Freestyle*'s Senam Okudzeto. Both mix the handmade and the appropriated to comment on the transfer of information, as well as the rupture, between American 'mainstream' and black culture.

Subtle differences do emerge, though. Okudzeto's work was primarily an assertion of identity based on personal experience: she was displaced as a child due to political turmoil in West Africa, and as an adult she maintains a broad network of relationships across the African diaspora; Báez, for her part, inserts images of women of colour into texts from which they were excluded or in which they were classed as primitive and uneducated. This is an act of enfranchisement that also implicates viewers by asking them to read, much as her collecting these pages is an act of reclamation. Although two-dimensional, her pieces demand a time-based engagement – reading – from their viewers, and so subvert the divide between two- and four-dimensional work.

Such blurring of artistic categories, the appeal to performance and the use of art as a vehicle of communication and thus social intercourse (all ideas the curators highlight in their catalogue essays) will seem familiar to viewers who have seen shows like *The Ungovernables*, the triennial at the New Museum last spring, which focused on process and participation, the messy and the handmade. Lax, however, relates them to a specific cultural history,